

Town of Amherst Public Works Committee
minutes of Thursday, November 4, 2004 meeting
Bangs Center, Lower Internal Meeting Room, 7:00pm

present: Vince O'Connor, Doug Lowing, Guilford Mooring, Rob Crowner, Mary Streeter and Paula Russell (petitioners for Article 14), various residents of Amherst Woods

1. Introduction

Doug convenes the meeting at 7:10pm. It will cover issues of traffic flow in the Amherst Woods neighborhood, prompted by Fall 2004 Town Meeting Article 14, requesting a cul-de-sac on Larkspur Drive. Doug explains that the Committee is interested in exploring the potential impacts of the proposal, but will not necessarily make a recommendation in either direction at this meeting.

Vince notes that the Planning Board voted Wednesday night to withdraw Article 30, which would have altered the PRP zone adjacent to Larkspur Drive. He states that an article requesting a zoning change in the greater office park area, including the former HBO-McKesson property at the other end of Amherst Woods, may be brought to Spring 2005 Town Meeting. He further states that the Planning Board is interested in doing a traffic exit study to determine where the vehicles already in the PRP go during the day.

Vince recommends soliciting other kinds of information that interested parties desire be part of the record so that a comprehensive traffic study can be created.

2. Commentary from members of the public

Gary Dupuis (181 Wildflower Drive) cites a study showing up to eighty cars using Larkspur Drive during rush hour, but asserts that simply counting cars is not sufficient. He urges study of the traffic impact on a wider area and suggests hiring an outside engineer.

Guilford describes the two studies that have been done recently: The first, a traffic count at the intersection of Larkspur and Wildflower, suggested that there was more traffic than would have been expected from the density of the neighborhood. The second, an peak hour origin/destination study, tried to determine who the people in the cars were and yielded a high count of about one hundred cars in the afternoon period. Both studies were done after the installation of a traffic light at Belchertown Road and Old Farm Road but before the repaving of Old Farm Road.

Mary Streeter (66 Larkspur Drive) explains that the PRP district was created in 1980, before Amherst Woods was developed. Attempts to redefine acceptable use in a PRP were unsuccessful at Town Meeting in Fall 2002 and Spring 2003. A theoretical build-out indicates that up to nine office buildings may be erected in the Larkspur Drive area; there are currently two. The residents of Larkspur Drive have been asking for traffic projections for approximately the last five years, but have gotten a hearing. Guilford confirms that the studies that have been done were not done to support the PRP articles.

Mary states that Larkspur Drive residents have already noticed increased cut-through traffic (estimated at 50-90%): people traveling from South Amherst and Orchard Valley to Belchertown Road and Echo Hill. It is not known how much of this is due to the existing PRP. The light at Old Farm Road and Route 9 has made getting to town via Amherst Woods faster and safer. Traffic flow in the town as a whole needs to be addressed. In the case of Larkspur Drive, the residents are attempting to affect a solution before the problem is too big.

Steve Abdell (Wildflower Drive) asks that Article 14 be withdrawn in light of the news that Article 30 will be withdrawn. Mary points out that the cul-de-sac was originally the idea of the Larkspur PRP developer and was opposed by residents of Larkspur Drive. They are interested in working to find a solution

that is acceptable to all parties. Guilford notes that the proposed Comprehensive Plan could include a traffic plan for the entire town, though this might cost \$100,000.

Vince asks how drivers come into Amherst Woods. Gary states that there is more traffic on Wildflower than on Larkspur. The Planning Board's proposed study would be too limited, examining only where traffic is coming and going.

Guilford states that not all of Larkspur is publicly owned. The developer owns the part within the PRP, and a resident owns a section between the PRP and the town way.

Eric Bittman (1 Teaberry Lane) states that a cul-de-sac would limit access to the PVTA bus stop on Old Belchertown Road (i.e., people could not be dropped off or picked up at the bus stop if Larkspur were blocked).

Gary states that there is a sidewalk most of the way on Wildflower, but it ends on Old Farm Road. Vince notes that the Select Board sidewalk plowing plan would cover this sidewalk.

John McCann (351 Old Farm Road) states that the light on Route 9 has diverted some of the traffic previously destined for Larkspur to Old Farm Road. He states that people drive too fast on Old Farm Road and that there is a blind curve at the junction that is especially dangerous. Teresa Sandler (291 Old Farm Road) concurs. Guilford explains that when the original Amherst Woods developer went bankrupt, road design was not complete. Vince asks whether it might be advisable to acquire some of the property and straighten out the road.

Penny Beebe (391 Old Farm Road) states that the curve helps slow traffic, but that there is a lot of foot traffic and that people tend to park on the road. Barb Pimlinson (The Hollow) and Leah Abiodun (481 Old Farm Road) offer similar observations. Vince asks whether "no parking" signs would help. Penny states that slower traffic and sidewalks are more important.

Doug observes that any zoning change in the PRP and/or HBO areas would have the effect of increasing traffic throughout the neighborhood, and conversely traffic itself is necessary to promote the viability of any business there. Vince agrees that this is why the Public Works Committee is looking at this issue, so that Public Works items can be done together with zoning changes rather than reacting to them, to make it safe and useful for all. Vince argues that all entrances to Amherst Woods should be studied simultaneously in order to anticipate and avoid potential problems.

Debbie Zacharian (88 Wildflower Drive) notes that there are 185 homes in Amherst Woods, with more on the way, and is concerned that the residents be heard in decision-making.

Harry Brooks (32 Hickory Lane) agrees that a sidewalk is needed on the hairpin turn, but points out that any businessperson in the PRP would definitely encourage clients to use shortcuts through the neighborhood and believes a barrier would be the only way to stop it on Larkspur.

Andrew Sillen (487 Old Farm Road) states that the repaving has served to increase speed on Old Farm Road and believes that the problem can be mitigated only by limiting the volume of traffic. He further argues that the interests of one group should not be traded for those of another, with the default solution being the status quo. Finally, he points out that public safety access to Amherst Woods might be compromised if Larkspur is closed off because Old Farm Road is in the midst of wetlands and is subject to freezing conditions.

Elise Jackendoff (170 Wildflower Drive) notes that there is no speed limit posted on Station Road and no visible crosswalk for the bike path. As a result, drivers go too fast on Station Road and then continue too fast on Wildflower. Additionally, vegetation along the road makes visibility worse.

Ray Shafiv (?) suggests that streetlights are needed on Wildflower.

3. Committee discussion

Guilford states that the Public Works Committee can only make recommendations to the Select Board or Town Meeting. The Planning Board is the legal authority for controlling development. Doug notes, however, that the Public Works Committee is interested in hearing public comment and observes that the Larkspur Drive petition has exposed many related issues.

Vince asks whether the population density of the neighborhood would permit placement of a "Thickly Settled" sign and/or a 25mph speed limit. Guilford answers that this is possible, though Mass Highway would have to give its approval.

Vince wants to know where streetlights currently exist in the neighborhood and where residents think they should be. Vince notes that the town now owns its streetlights and can control their placement. He would advocate for appropriate lighting systems that illuminate the street, not the sky or houses. He believes there should be streetlights at every intersection. Elise states that not everyone wants lights at all.

4. Community involvement in the process

Paula Russell (54 Larkspur Drive) states that Larkspur Drive residents have tried to interest Amherst Woods residents in the PRP issue, but have had little success until now. She explains that since their concerns about the PRP have not been addressed, they have decided to request the cul-de-sac. General discussion about these points ensues.

Mary advocates for participation in Town Meeting and vigilance in democracy. She notes that a PRP article is likely to be brought to Spring 2005 Town Meeting by the Planning Board and recommends the involvement of Amherst Woods residents.

Vince states that once a neighborhood exists, issues related to it are no longer exclusively Planning Board issues but may be addressed by Public Works or other relevant committees. The problems of Amherst Woods will not be solved by a small group of people.

Debbie argues that traffic studies should be done before any new buildings are built. However, Doug notes that the developer can put up buildings there by right. This committee can only recommend how potential traffic flow should be addressed. Vince states that there are creative ways for neighbors to take proactive steps.

Elise states that traffic slowdown near Amherst College has contributed to why people want to go through Amherst Woods.

Guilford states that (1) other neighborhoods have worse traffic; and (2) the majority of Amherst Woods speed problems are from neighborhood residents, according to the study. He lists three aspects of traffic calming: Engineering, Enforcement, and Education. He states that new ways of addressing traffic issues could be tried here, but also urges education. He states that it has not yet been determined where the excess (over expected) traffic volume of the studies comes from.

5. Committee discussion

Vince states that a coordinated traffic count, done on the same day - at Larkspur Drive, Old Farm Road, Wildflower/Station, and on Station Road - is needed to establish a baseline before any changes are made. He recommends getting a cost estimate for this study, and suggests asking advice from the Planning Department and Public Works Department about traffic calming solutions.

Doug suggests that instead of trying to craft a recommendation now, a proposal be brought for consideration at the next meeting.

Rob would like to examine possible non-traffic solutions in any study.

Doug suggests that neighborhood residents make a report on current conditions and a list of their concerns. Vince suggests that official community organizations can detail their views in letter form.

Mary urges cross-communication between the various neighborhood groups.

Vince observes that the petitioners may reconsider their plans for Article 14 and asks that the committee be informed before it would come up at Town Meeting. He suggests the committee plan to meet on Wednesday, November 10 before that night's Town Meeting session. Doug states that such a meeting would not be a "forum" either supporting or opposing the article. He advises using the article as a way of pushing for the study that everyone seems to want. The committee agrees to meet on November 10.

6. The meeting adjourns at 9:15.